

INSIGHTS INTO SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION THEORY AND DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE TEACHING

By

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to review second language acquisition theory and some of the methods practiced in language classes. The review substantiates that comprehensible input as the crucial determining factor for language acquisition and consciously learned linguistic knowledge can be used only to edit the output of the acquired language sometimes before or after the production. It is also confirmed that the process of acquiring a second language is similar to the process acquiring L1 and, therefore, the teaching method that provides more input is more effective than the method that insists on conscious learning.

Key words: Skill-building, Comprehensible Input, Language Acquisition, Language Learning.

INTRODUCTION

It has been hypothesized that students who receive comprehensible input easily outperform the subjects who depend more on form for the acquisition of a second language (e.g. Kweon & Kim, 2008; Mason and Krashen, 1997; Krashen, 2003; Lee, 2005, Lee & Hsu, 2009; Lehmann, 2007; Nishino, 2007). The core hypotheses of second language acquisition have confirmed that learners acquire language when they receive comprehensible input in a low-anxiety situation and consciously learned knowledge can be used for editing the output of the acquired language. Even the hypotheses, which insist on skill-building approach, do not deny the importance of input. Therefore, the method that provides more input may be more desirable than the method that insists on conscious learning.

Second Language Acquisition Theory

Firstly, the paper reviews some of the popular hypotheses of second language acquisition and the factors that contribute to the development of language competence.

The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis

The acquisition-learning hypothesis (Krashen, 2003) claims that there are two independent ways of developing second language competence:

- The first one is language 'acquisition' which states that acquisition is a subconscious process; the process which

children and adult undergo while they acquire L1.

- The second is language 'learning'. Learning is a conscious process; when we learn we know that we are learning the language. It is, of course, building knowledge about language or knowing about language. Conscious learning refers to learning grammar rules, vocabulary in isolation etc.

The Comprehension Hypothesis

The Comprehension Hypothesis (Krashen, 2003) states that language acquisition happens only when learners understand messages while experiencing input. In other words, acquisition happens when learners receive aural and written comprehensible input. Language acquisition does not happen when they learn and practice grammar rules. The hypothesis claims that if the current level of understanding of a learner is (i), then he or she can move to (i+1) input to foster acquisition. Here, the learners' previously acquired linguistic competence will help them move from the current level (i) to the next level (i+1). The theory further explains that language acquisition is involuntary. As the process of acquisition is subconscious, the acquirer does not know if he/she acquires language while obtaining input.

The Monitor Hypothesis

The monitor hypothesis (Krashen, 1982), which is related to the comprehension hypothesis, explains that learners produce language using their acquired competence and

they use consciously learned knowledge to edit the output of the acquired system sometimes before or after the utterance is spoken or written. The hypothesis states that there are several constraints in using consciously learned knowledge in second language performance. In order to use consciously learned rules, the following conditions must be met:

- The acquirer must know the rule. This is a formidable constraint because rules are very complex to be taught and learned, and are often misstated in grammar books (Murphy & Hastings, 2006)
- The acquirer must be focused on form. Generally, acquirers engage more with form only when they are doing grammar exercises and not when reading and writing (Ponniah, 2007).
- The acquirer must have time to apply the rules. They will get enough time to apply rules only when doing grammar exercises and not in real situations. If they over-use rules in real situation fluency will be seriously hampered.

The Affective Filter Hypothesis

The affective filter hypothesis claims that affective variables such as motivation, self-confidence and anxiety will indirectly affect acquisition. Learners with high motivation, self-confidence and low level of anxiety are the successful language acquirers; the input will easily become intake for them. In fact, high anxiety, low self-esteem and low motivation are the blocks that will prevent input from reaching the Language Acquisition Device. The hypothesis further claims that acquirers acquire language when they experience comprehensible input in a low-anxiety situation.

The Skill-Building Hypothesis

The skill-building hypothesis claims that second language learners first learn consciously the language skills such as grammar rules, vocabulary, syntax, and spelling and later applying them in real situations by laborious drills and exercises. The hypothesis assumes that linguistic competence comes from conscious learning and the consciously learned knowledge will help them comprehend a text. This is a delayed-gratification

approach to language learning and there are several limits to this type of learning (e.g. Krashen, 2004; Ponniah, 2009, Murphy & Hastings, 2006).

The Output Hypothesis

The output hypothesis states that learners consciously recognize the linguistic problems and discover rules to solve the problems, and finally attempt to automatize the rules through fluency practice and error correction. The hypothesis (Swain, 2005) has three functions:

- The noticing function
- The hypothesis testing function
- The metalinguistic function

All the three functions are related to conscious learning, and not subconscious language acquisition (discussed in Ponniah & Krashen, 2008). The Noticing will help learners consciously recognize their problems. The process of editing is described as the testing of hypothesis about language (Ponniah, 2009a) and the metalinguistic refers to conscious learning. The hypothesis claims that conscious learning is a necessary step to develop language competence. In fact, there are several limitations in using consciously learned knowledge in second language performance (e.g. Truscott, 1998, 2005; Krashen, 1982). However, the hypothesis does not deny the importance of input.

A brief review of the theories confirms that language is acquired by experiencing comprehensible input and consciously learned knowledge can be used to edit the output of the acquired language. It is also confirmed that attempting to develop language competence using conscious grammatical knowledge is a delayed-gratification approach and, in fact, there are several limitations in using this type of knowledge in second language performance.

Language Teaching Methods

Secondly, the paper examines some of the methods that are used in classrooms and have analyzed to what extend these methods help learners acquire language competence.

Grammar-Translation Method

In the grammar translation method, rules are first taught to

the learners and the vocabulary is learned from bilingual word list. Exercises are designed to learn and practice grammar rules and vocabulary in isolation. Rules are explained in students' first language. Even when the sentences given for drills are comprehensible, students focus on form and not on the meaning of the sentences. As the students receive only a very little amount of comprehensible input in the language, they will acquire only little amount of language.

Audio Lingual Method

In the audio lingual method, the emphasis is given to mimic a dialogue and eventually the learners memorize the dialogue, and through pattern drills they try to automatize the memorized chunks. In addition, they engage in basic drills such as repetition drill, chain drill (to make the learned dialogue automatic through such practice), transformation (e.g. changing a positive sentence into a negative) and translation. Learners' errors are corrected while speaking because the emphasis is more on the accuracy in production and, therefore, conscious rules of the language are taught, assuming that learners will correct errors. As the entire class hour is devoted to practice a dialogue through drills and doing grammar exercises, the method fails to provide more comprehensible input. The method presumes that conscious control of the language is necessary for acquisition.

Direct-Method

In this method, the instruction is given in the target language and the students do the exercises in the L2 and the use of first language is not allowed in the classroom. The method insists on the learners to think in the target language. It focuses on the inductive method of teaching grammar, which encourages the learners to guess grammar rules used in an utterance in order to avoid errors during the production of the language. As in grammar translation, this approach aims at accuracy in production and therefore errors of the students are corrected. Students spend a great deal of time in learning grammar. The insistence on the use of grammar through error correction at the early stage is a constraint for learning the language and it will cause high anxiety. However, the

teacher explanation of the rules in the target language is a good source of comprehensible input.

Total Physical Response

Students respond physically to the commands given by the teacher. They are asked to obey the commands, which involves physical response of students is a kind of action-based drills and practice. For example, if the instructor says, 'sit down' all the students will sit. In this method, listening is given more importance than writing and speaking. Students are not forced to speak; in fact, they are allowed to speak only when they feel that they are ready to talk.

The major constraints of this method are the continuous use of imperative sentences, grammar based lessons and the inductive learning of grammar. But when compared to the grammar translation, the audio-lingual and the direct method, this method provides more comprehensible input and the students' physical response to the teacher talk confirms this. As the students are not forced to produce output, they feel more comfortable in the class, which, of course, will help them acquire language in a low anxiety situation. The method gives more importance to 'comprehension' which certainly will lower the affective filter of learners when they experience the language.

The Natural Approach

Class time is devoted for providing comprehensible input. The teacher explanation of a topic is only in the target language and the students can use the second language or the L1. Students' errors are not corrected unless the communication is seriously impaired. Grammar exercises are not given in classroom because there are several constraints in using consciously learned grammatical knowledge in real situations and on a wide variety of tests (Krashen, 2003; Ponniah, 2009). The approach is correct with the monitor hypothesis that acquisition takes place only when experiencing input and the consciously learned grammar knowledge can be used only to edit the output of the acquired knowledge. The approach claims that grammar is acquired in predictable order while experiencing input in the language.

The insistence on learning rules of grammar and other skills in the grammar-translation method will raise the affective filter, which, of course, will prevent students from

experiencing input. In fact, this method is consistent with the skill-building approach, which claims that conscious rules are first learned and they are used in real situations through laborious drills. The audio-lingual method insists on the inductive grammar learning using dialogues and drills, and the students spend a little amount of time in experiencing input. The teacher talk becomes a good source of input in the Direct Method but at the same time the inductive grammar learning and the error correction will cause high anxiety. The Total Physical Response provides more input than the previous methods. As the students are not forced to speak, the anxiety level will become low while learning the language. However, the inductive grammar learning will cause high anxiety. As the entire class hour is devoted for receiving comprehensible input, the Natural Method helps students acquire more language in a low-anxiety situation.

Conclusion

Teaching students using the method that provides comprehensible input is more desirable than the methods that insist on conscious learning of skills such as grammar, vocabulary, spelling and syntax. It is also confirmed that spending more time on learning such skills will take time away from experiencing input and in fact this will raise the anxiety level of the learners in the learning environment. This begin to teach students a little grammar at the intermediate level. However, they must be given awareness that consciously learned knowledge can be used only to edit the output of the acquired system sometimes before or after the utterance is produced.

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